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Fathers on Leave Alone: Does It Make a Difference to Their Lives?

Over the last two decades there has been a continuing enhancement of fathers' leave entitlements. Depending on eligibility criteria and type of leave, fathers may be on leave at the same time as the mother or alone. Despite these developments, little is known about men on leave in a "home alone" manner. The experiences of fathers were explored through a qualitative study using a purposive sample of fourteen Portuguese fathers who took leave alone for one month. Lived experiences are diverse but emphasize the specific impact of leave alone and six key processes: negotiating, caregiving, learning, bonding, undoing gender and experiencing emotions. From a policy perspective, findings suggest that there are differences between family time and father's time alone.

Keywords: parental leave, fathers, masculinity, gender equality, lived experiences, Portugal

In the early nineties, the Nordic countries surprised the worlds of welfare by introducing a radical reform in parental leave: the non-transferable "daddy month." Norway was the first country in 1993 to reserve four weeks of well-paid parental leave exclusively for fathers. Sweden and Iceland followed suit, and the so-called "fathers' quota" came to symbolize the Nordic gender equality model. Since then nearly all European countries have introduced new individual and non-transferable leave rights for fathers, mainly in the form of "paternity leave," that is the right to a few days of paid leave taken with the mother after childbirth (Moss, 2012).

An increasing number of studies are examining men's use of leave and its impact on family division of housework and childcare. However, little is known about fathers' understandings and experiences of these policy measures. In particular, there is scant evidence on the personal experience of fathers taking up the more radical form of "leave alone," implying daylong care while the mother works.

This article reports findings from a qualitative study on the perceptions and practices of fathers who took thirty days of parental leave alone in a southern European setting (Portu-

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gal). While all EU countries today provide statutory parental leave, only a few have introduced a policy reserving one to three months of well-paid leave for fathers or a bonus in case of gender sharing. Portugal is one of those. The paper begins by describing the policy setting for the study and the theoretical and methodological framework. We then examine the experiences and profiles of fathers on “home alone” leave. Finally, the main findings and their relevance for leave policies and gender equality are discussed.

THE SETTING FOR THE STUDY: LEAVE POLICIES IN PORTUGAL

Work-family policies in Portugal started out late, only after the transition to democracy in 1974. For nearly fifty years, during the right-wing dictatorship, pro-traditional policies promoted a male breadwinner model emphasizing women’s subordinate role as homemakers and men’s role as “head of family” and provider. Family policies after the transition to democracy rejected previous gender cultural models and promoted state responsibilities to support full-time working men and women, leading to a gradual but steady increase in parents’ entitlements to leave and in publicly subsidized services to support dual-earner couples with young children (Wall & Escobedo, 2009; 2013).

In this context, a well-paid but short “early return to work” leave policy model was introduced in 1976, with a job-protected, fully-compensated leave of three months for employed women. Over the next three decades, leave entitlements were made more generous for both mothers and fathers, with a new focus on “parental” entitlements emerging in the 1980’s and 90’s: individual entitlement to three months unpaid additional parental leave (today called “complementary parental leave”) was introduced; two days of paternity leave, to be taken with the mother during the first month after childbirth, were introduced in 1995 and extended in 1999 to three weeks of fully-compensated leave for fathers; maternity leave, as from the mid-nineties, could be divided between parents by mutual agreement and was extended to four months at 100% or five months at 80% of previous earnings.

More recently (Labour Law, 2009), the term “Maternity Leave” was replaced by the more gender neutral “Initial Parental Leave” and three major changes came into effect. First, a “sharing bonus” was introduced: an extra month of fully-compensated leave is available if the father takes four weeks or more of initial parental leave on his own after the first six weeks reserved for the mother. There are two options: five months at 100% of previous earnings or six months at 83%. The second change was an increase in paid “paternity leave” to four weeks. Finally, compensation (at 25% of previous earnings) of complementary parental leave was introduced, if taken immediately after initial parental leave.

Fathers in Portugal can therefore take paternity leave, initial parental leave and complementary parental leave. With the new policy, fathers’ leave periods have become longer, and fathers’ use of initial parental leave has increased substantially. Before the 2009 reform only 0.6% of fathers shared the leave. In 2010, one year after its introduction, 20% of parents divided the initial parental leave, either in the form of the longer (58%) or the shorter option (42%).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The study which informs this article is rooted in social policy theory, in particular perspectives which have aimed to incorporate gender into the comparative welfare state debate. Drawing on the critiques of concepts such as “decommodification” to assess welfare state variation, feminist scholarship in the 1990s argued that social policy theory undervalued

caregiving, especially for children, and neglected to theorize the role of the state in relation to the female caregiver and unpaid work more generally. They proposed alternative theoretical dimensions, such as the “defamilialization” of unpaid work, and called for comparing welfare states according to the extent to which they reinforce or dissipate the traditional male breadwinner/female caregiver model (cf., Leira, 1992; Orloff, 1993; Sainsbury, 1996).

In spite of differences between the so-called *women’s employment* perspective, focusing on the conceptualization of women’s connections to paid work (e.g., Lewis, 1992; Orloff, 1993), and the *care* perspective, emphasizing not only the value of care but also women’s rights to time for care (e.g., Fraser, 1994; Knijn & Kremer, 1997), analysis in the last decade adopted a more consensual framework. Drawing on the concept of an “earner-caregiver” model in which parents take primary responsibility for the care of young children while engaging symmetrically in paid and unpaid work, theory and research have been comparing policies that promote both women’s ties to employment and men’s ties to caregiving (Ray, Gornick, & Schmitt, 2010). At the heart of this approach lies the question of work-family policies and how they affect the ways in which parents perceive and construct gender divisions of labour (Crompton, 2006; Gornick & Meyers, 2003; Hegewisch & Gornick, 2011).

A major argument of this perspective is that parental leave policies have the potential to encourage gender equality by creating greater opportunities for both men and women to combine paid employment and family involvement (Ciccia & Verloo, 2012; Lammi-Taskula, 2008; O’Brien, 2009). Paid parental leave, in particular in the form of individual and non-transferable leave for fathers, is seen as an important type of policy encouraging men’s participation in early childcare, since the use of leave would act as a significant factor in shifting men’s competence and investment in the emotional, social and moral responsibilities of parenting (Duvander & Johanssen, 2012; Haas & Hwang, 2008). Femininity and masculinity, mothering and fathering, are therefore conceptualized as dynamic social processes which evolve over time not only through individual agency and negotiation but also on the basis of new normative and institutional contexts (Brandth & Kvande, 1998; 2002; Hobson, 2002; Holter, 2012). Moreover, rather than assume that this is a linear and one-directional shift, theorization suggests that there might be plural and complex pathways of change, depending on leave policy architecture as well as on social conditions and processes, both within families and in the labour market.

PAST RESEARCH

One of the major contributions of research on parental leave has been to assess the connections between parental leave and gender equality. Moving beyond the focus on gender equality incentives in parental leave and the factors which facilitate or hinder father’s take-up (e.g., Bygren & Duvander, 2006; Chronholm, 2002; Haas, Allard, & Hwang, 2002; Haas & Rostgaard, 2011; Lammi-Taskula, 2008; Pajumets, 2010), a major strand of research has examined fathers’ experiences of leave and the impact of taking leave on fathers’ participation in childcare and relationships with children.

Nordic research carried out in the 90s suggests that fathers who were taking the “daddy month” on a “home alone” basis became more aware of infant life and “slow time” than those who took parental leave with their partner (Brandth & Kvande, 1998; 2001). Men on leave also valued the strengthening of father-child bonds (Haas, 1992; Huttenen, 1996). Slow time is described as a daily life rhythm related to caregiving which is perceived as less stressful than daily life at work. Findings also pointed to confident, highly educated fathers

who shape their own form of care-work: rather than closeness to the child, “masculine care” emerged as committed to “doing” things with the child and “teaching” the child independence; also, most of the men interviewed did not do much housework as they perceived caring for the child as the main reason for taking leave.

According to this literature then, fathers’ caring activities seem to be linked to a hegemonic form of masculinity, drawing on the importance of men’s role in educating and connecting the child to the outside world. Moreover, although research was expecting to find transgressive gender relations, in line with the major hypotheses on changing masculinities (Connell, 1995), the “degendering” of unpaid work did not emerge as a major trend (Deven, 2005; Ekberg, Eriksson & Friebe, 2005).

In contrast, recent qualitative research on Swedish fathers (Almqvist, 2008; Chronholm, 2007) and stay-at-home fathers who opted out of the labour market to care for a child (Doucet & Merla, 2007; McKay & Doucet, 2010) points to some engagement of men in innovative forms of masculinity. Although findings also emphasize masculine forms of care and conventional perceptions of mothering and fathering as distinct, they unveil some political changes in fathers, such as a new child-orientated masculinity and the valuing of unpaid work. Positive effects on fathers’ involvement and autonomy in childcare, in particular when more days of leave are used, have also been highlighted by quantitative data (e.g., Haas & Hwang, 2008; Nepomnyaschy & Waldfogel, 2007; Seward, Yeatts, Zottarelli, & Fletcher, 2006; Sundstrom & Duvander, 2002).

The key aims of our study will be to contribute to this important strand of research by exploring the lived experiences of fathers on leave alone and then examining whether they confirm or challenge predominant understandings of gender role models and masculinities. To what extent do the social processes and consequences of the experience of leave alone imply little change in these understandings, largely confirming previous findings? To what extent do they lead to some disruption in fathers’ gender identities and their perceptions of fatherhood and motherhood? Given the “familialistic” background of the Portuguese welfare state, particular attention will be given to the idea of “masculine care” identified in previous studies.

SAMPLE AND METHODS

Drawing on a symbolic interactionist approach that prioritizes the agency and subjective perspectives of social actors (Finch & Mason, 1993; Kaufmann, 1996), in-depth interviews were carried out with fourteen fathers who had taken leave alone. The interview instrument included eight core questions acting as prompts for fathers’ narratives: Could you please describe the leave you took after your child was born? Why did you decide to take leave in this way? How did people around you react to your decision (workplace, family, friends)? What was it like to be a dad on leave, can you recall the first days alone and the weeks that followed? Do you think taking up leave had any consequences on your life (career, family, opinions)? How was going back to work? What does it mean to be a father and a man? What is your opinion of the current leave scheme?

A non-probability purposive sampling procedure was used to ensure participants were fathers who had taken leave alone for thirty or more days between 2009 and 2011. Contacts were made through word of mouth (snowballing) and personal relationships. Formal contacts with firms in the private sector were made in order to bring in diversity of sectors of employment. In order to achieve variation in the lived experiences of fathers, the study aimed at a sample size of 12 to 20 interviews (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). The interviews lasted

between one and a half and three hours and responses were taped and fully transcribed. Only pseudonyms identify the respondents in order to maintain confidentiality.

Sample

The sample of fourteen fathers who participated in the exploratory study were living with their partner and children in the city of Lisbon or in the inland town of Covilhã. All couples were full-time dual-earner couples, in line with the predominant trend in Portuguese families with children, and most had one or two children (two had three children). Father's income was mostly higher than the median average reported for the country but there was some variety, with four men well below average, two close to it and eight above. The fathers were between age 27 and 54 and had low, average or high levels of education. All were employed full-time either in the private (six) or public or state corporate sector (eight), with the following professions: policeman, accountant, hairdresser, television journalist, driver, nurse, aircraft maintenance engineer, sports manager, internet maintenance manager, architect, designer, management consultant, computer engineer, senior civil servant.

Data Coding and Analysis

Interviews were coded and analysed by the researcher in charge and two researchers, using the grounded theory method based on a step by step inductive analysis which respects both manifest and latent contents (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Due to the small number of interviews (eight carried out by the researcher in charge, six by the junior researchers) and the exploratory nature of the study, the researcher in charge chose not to use quantitative theme-identifying software. Interviews were first read vertically, in order to extract a summary of each father's narrative, and then horizontally, in order to derive the main emerging themes. Three procedures which address the issues of coding and validation may be described.

The first procedure involved reducing the interview text to a two-page summary of each father's leave story and background; a few key experiences were extracted from each case, in order to annotate their variety and to sensitize researchers to what they mean for fathers. All three researchers participated in this procedure and reviewed the summaries for consistency.

The second procedure involved defining the main themes for transversal analysis. Many common themes emerged from the data, some prompted directly by the interview questions (e.g., negotiation of leave; daily practices and activities), others emerging from the fathers' narratives and in connection with our theoretical research questions (e.g. masculine or feminine division of care; personal consequences of leave such as learning and bonding; understandings of gender roles). A preliminary thematic coding agenda was applied by the researchers in order to ensure inter-observer reliability.

Once agreed on, the themes were used in all 14 interviews, to enable transversal scrutiny and to move on to the third procedure - the extraction of meaningful interpretations and concepts (e.g., "supported" versus "innovative" profiles of fathers). Inter-coder reliability was high, with a few discrepancies arising in relation to the concepts used to categorize the respondents. Additional reviews and discussions were carried out within and outside the research team to resolve them (e.g., findings and concepts were discussed in two seminars, within a wider circle of researchers, in order to reinforce existing concepts or suggest alternative ones).

RESULTS

The Lived Experiences of Fathers: Six Key Social Processes

Throughout the interviews, fathers were asked about their experience of taking leave and being at home alone. Daily life, decisions on the use of leave, the experience of time and bonding, strategies for dealing with the care and demands of a baby, other domains of life such as housework or leisure, opinions on the role of fathering and mothering, were all abundantly discussed. From fathers' descriptions of taking leave alone to care for a baby, six social processes linked to this life experience emerged. All the fathers talk about these overarching processes, enabling us to identify fundamental aspects of the experience.

The first process involves participants' experiences of *negotiating* leave, mainly with partner and employers. The length of leave (five or six months) and the amount of time taken by each parent (one or more months, and when) always require a complex decision-making process in which the couple has to weigh up several factors: the impact of leave on each partner's career, employers' openness to fathers' leave-taking, and the interests of child and parents. All fathers had been informed of the new entitlements contained in the 2009 law, discussed the use of leave with their partner and informed the employer as soon as possible. Fathers employed in the private sector had more adverse reactions in the workplace than those in the public and state corporate sectors and were more often the forerunners of leave use. After noting that in his couple and family fathers' new entitlements were received as important and natural, Manuel (aged 34, internet maintenance manager, private company, the first to ask for this type of leave in the workplace, wife a journalist), described his experience of reprisals in the workplace:

T. and I still thought about whether she would take five months and I one, or she would take four and I two, but ... even one was bad enough. Well, it was bad, but it could be worse. I can't compare the work I do with working in a factory, where reprisals are much more noticeable. But I think there are ways of doing these things.... That's more like what I went through, that psychological game. The first question they asked me was ... wasn't it enough to take just a few days of paternity leave?

In contrast, Roberto, a computer engineer working in the corporate public sector (aged 54, married to a judge, 3 children) did not have to take workplace constraints into account; this allowed negotiation of leave to focus more on the interests of the mother and the child.

We discussed what to do. We preferred that she took the maximum she could take and then ... I came on the scene. Because she was breastfeeding and so this was an advantage. And then we thought it was important to put off the moment when the baby went to the crèche. And there was another aspect to the decision: my wife's job. It was always difficult for her to stay away from the courts for long, the work piles up.... We had to find the balance between caring for the baby at home for a bit longer without penalizing our working lives.

Other workplace constraints on the mother's side, in particular when women occupy unskilled jobs which they feel may be endangered if the employer has to replace them, also leads couples to consider the sharing of leave as more balanced. Joseph (31, driver, inland town) says his employer was not very pleased:

My wife works in a small restaurant ... and things are not looking good at all, and her boss said outright it would be difficult if she took 4 months, so we talked it over and we thought it was best if I took care of the kid as well for a couple of months.... My boss wasn't all that pleased either! But too bad, we divided it between us. We took advantage of this modern stuff...

Close relatives such as parents, siblings and parents-in-law, both men and women, were strongly supportive of fathers taking leave. In fact, all the fathers reported positive attitudes from family members, while reactions from friends and work colleagues were varied. Some fathers recalled joking and strangeness from close friends and colleagues, in particular in workplaces where fathers had never taken leave before. Often, however, this led other men to think about using leave and later inquiring about the "best way to go about it".

The second process relates to what fathers' actually do while on leave, that is, their multiple *activities*, including care of a baby and other household tasks, work time or leisure time. Fathers all describe what some scholars call a "shift in time experience" (Hallman, Di-enhart, & Beaton, 2007). They spoke of experiencing both a strong pressure from the constant and tiring demands of daylong caring for a baby and a difficult juggling, or loss, of opportunities to do other things, including resting, working or household tasks. Rather than the experience of slow time then, it was the experience of fast time, related to the care-giver's job, and leaving little time to rest or do other things for very long, that emerged from the interviews.

It was a very demanding month.... He'd wake up, I'd give him his bottle, then he would go back to sleep a bit, then I would play with him. Then I'd make lunch, tidy up ... interact with him. Then he would sleep a bit more, but almost every time I thought I'd take a bit of a rest, he would wake up. It was a never-ending cycle, it's really very tiring looking after a baby all day. (Rafael, 28, management consultant, 1 child)

Apart from caring for the baby, fathers also try to build housework, work or leisure into their daily activities. The kinds of activity vary, as they are shaped by the father's agency and efforts in trying to get other things done at the same time, by pressure to do some work while on leave and also by the availability of a third person to help out. One or two fathers in positions of responsibility (chief accountant) or involved in work with difficult deadlines (researcher) occasionally went into work (with the baby) for an afternoon to sort out an urgent problem or did some work from home, usually in the evenings when their partner returned. Most made an effort to get all the housework and shopping done, while a few cared for the baby and cooked lunch but did not worry about other housework, relying on their partner, a daily or a family member for help. Leisure activities such as surfing the net or reading are usually mentioned as being difficult to achieve, due to the many interruptions. The two fathers who felt they had some free time for themselves and experienced time as less demanding were also those who had daily support in care and household tasks: Paul, an engineer, had his mother's support to help with childcare every afternoon, while David had a domestic employee who also helped care for the baby.

The *learning* process is also a fundamental aspect of the experience mentioned by all the fathers. Having been on paternity leave and helped to care for previous children, all the interviewees had acquired at least some basic skills, such as changing nappies, by the time they stayed alone. Most fathers therefore describe the acquisition of skills as a process which

goes beyond the role of a care “helper”. This includes learning how to be an “independent” or self-sufficient caregiver by taking on responsibility alone, learning the ins and outs of emotional care rather than just instrumental care such as changing nappies and feeding, and “testing oneself” as a solo caregiver.

That’s when we truly become parents, isn’t it? When we have such a close tie to them that we know just by the kind of crying, what he wants ... that kind of awareness is very important, it shows how close you are, and that’s what it really means to be a father. (Rafael, 28, management consultant, 1 child)

Fathers also tell us about the social process of *bonding*. Not surprisingly, as emphasized by previous research, fathers consider that being on leave alone strengthens father-child bonds, since time together promotes closeness, mutual understanding, affection, sharing and involvement. However, they also describe the strengthening of other bonds, in particular of conjugal bonds, as well as of intergenerational bonds, usually due to the stronger interest and involvement of the father’s parents in their son’s experience.

During that time she developed a very strong bond with me. Actually she got so close to me that when she woke up at night she only wanted me, she only quietened down with me. We are very good friends, we two... (Leonardo, 32, hairdresser, 2 children)

There’s no-one else there, and that creates a stronger bond. When people say there’s a stronger tie between mother and baby, I think that tie between mother and baby is transferred to the father, at least that’s what I felt. (Joaquim, 39, accountant, 3 children)

I always used to do a lot at home, but when I stayed by myself, that’s when I understood the important little things that happen in day-to-day life, and that has helped me to appreciate the other person’s perspective.... My wife and I got to know each other better, and I think it actually helped our relationship quite a bit. (Manuel, 34, internet manager, 1 child)

Lastly, in different ways and with different meanings, fathers mention a process of *undoing* or *contesting gender* roles. For some this is merely a question of diverging slightly from routine gender practices in which certain care tasks and responsibilities were carried out or overseen by their partner. Rather than contesting gender, the situation is seen as a temporary undoing of gender which is beneficial for the mother’s participation in the labour market and/or for the child’s well-being (staying at home for an extra month). In other cases the move away from pre-conceived male and female roles is rooted in an experience of growing contestation and reflexivity. It is embedded in a process involving a deconstruction of gender differences and traditional ways of thinking about gender roles. Manuel, an internet manager in a private company, is one of the more reflexive fathers. He describes how being alone on leave made him think about the construction of gender equality as an on-going step by step process:

I think equality ... is not just household chores, it’s not just your worries, not just the shared leave. I think it’s the other side, really understanding the man.... Making meals, being at home all day, that’s an effort, so it’s good to share that aspect....

The other thing is—I can sleep with him here close beside me, feel his warmth, even though I [the man] have to fetch him, “right, I’ll stick with the worst part which is going to get him, and you get the best part, which is staying with him. Why don’t we share it the other way round? You go there, make up the bottle, and I’ll give it to him in bed”. That doesn’t happen, but I think that’s the next step, that may be the next step...

The sixth key process which emerged was the experience of *emotions* and *feelings* related to being alone at home with a small baby. Emotions are mostly positive, involving descriptions of pleasure, liking, happiness, satisfaction, willingness, ability, responsibility, confidence (in oneself and in the future of the child), connections, proximity, affection, awareness, friendship, challenges, testing oneself, pride, calm, empathy and mutual understanding. Negative emotions are related to feelings of tiredness, panic, worrying (about getting everything done or problems at the workplace), rush and loss of time.

Diversity of Experiences: Four Main Profiles

Another key result is the diversity of lived experiences. The overarching themes and processes analysed above show that the lived experience of fathers is influenced by structural and interactional contexts, in particular by workplace culture and partners’ gender and professional roles, as well as strongly shaped by the father’s agency and reflexivity. By analyzing how the key processes are experienced and combined in different ways, we can use this sample to identify four main profiles of fathers’ experience of being alone on leave.

Fathers who fall into the *supported* profile are those who see themselves as more traditional fathers who have always strived to “help” their partner at home but are more comfortable when their caring role is supervised and mediated by the mother. During leave, these fathers who see themselves as “helpers” are strongly supported both by their partner (who may make an effort to rush home earlier or in the lunch hour) and by a third party (a mother, a domestic employee) who is usually present during part of the day or helps with caring and housework.

Actually, I spent a lot of time at my mother’s house. I would look after him in the morning, then go with him to my mum’s. (Paul, 39, aircraft maintenance engineer, 2 children)

I was clumsy, but with lessons from my wife and regular help from my mother ... I managed. Now I am more used to it..., but even so I hope the need won’t arise again. What was really important to me was that I was able to help my wife. (Joseph, 31, driver, 2 children)

The three fathers in this profile describe a greater sense of responsibility, feel that they have learned to be more autonomous but continue to see themselves as secondary caregivers, in contrast to the mother, who is perceived as the primary and natural caregiver. The new entitlement is seen as an opportunity, but the period of leave is appreciated mainly from the child’s point of view and for balancing work and family life. The fact that the father is alone on leave from a gender equality perspective is therefore less important. In fact, these fathers would have preferred to have more time on leave with the mothers.

For men in the *fundamental break* profile, the period of leave alone is experienced as a key moment in family gender roles, as a fundamental break with previous highly differen-

tiated gender roles. These are men who before going on leave alone were weak “helper” partners and fathers in a context where female management of unpaid work was the rule. Considered as less professional or even inefficient by their partners, these men were called upon to help out but did little and were never allowed to be responsible for any particular task, even though they would have liked to take on more. The two men in this profile both took leave alone because their wives (a judge and a saleswoman) felt it would be beneficial for professional reasons to go back to work earlier. In such a highly unequal gender context, fathers unexpectedly find themselves in a totally novel situation, having to cope with full responsibility for a baby for the first time in a long period of conjugal life.

I have a clear idea that I reminded myself to say “right, it’s time to feed, or give him the bottle...” ... I may even have done the same things before [with his other children] but it was always with my wife to guide me, she was in command. This last time I was home alone, so I acted more responsibly. I also managed to get over that initial panic, of saying whenever he cried “he’s crying, what’s happening?”..., so there was ... less panic, my reactions were better organized and rational. (Roberto, 54, computer engineer, 3 children)

In some ways then, they experience the period of leave as offering a time of unusual responsibility and independence, which was appreciated. Moreover, unlike the men in the previous profile, they did not delegate the care of the child to third parties and underwent an important process of learning. The final result is double-pronged: the fathers continue to see themselves as “helper” fathers and the mother as primary caregiver, but they feel that they have changed, in particular they have become more confident in the home and in the parental role.

The third profile reveals fathers who before taking leave were already regularly involved in housework and childcare. Rather than “helpers”, they see themselves as “sharers” of housework and “involved” fathers. “Home alone” leave is therefore tied more closely to core issues of autonomy and innovation. The period of leave brings little in the way of new learning of basic tasks, but it is experienced as a final step towards becoming an independent caregiver to whom all tasks may be delegated, as well as an opportunity to be creative, by building up an individualized profile of fathering. This may explain why the six men in the *innovation* and *independence* profile experienced leave as a period of intense activity in which they engage in a large variety of tasks and become fully involved caregivers.

As a couple we are quite egalitarian. It was total sharing with the baby ... I didn’t breastfeed that’s all. During that month everything went well, I already knew how to do everything, even if I was slightly unsure to begin with. In fact, I would have liked to stay longer, because it’s a phase in the child’s development in which interaction makes a difference, it increases and becomes more gratifying every day. Being on leave alone also makes for more complicity with the child, so it gives both parents a chance to develop their special place. In my view, it doesn’t take away anything from the mother but it adds to the father’s role. (Raul, 37, TV journalist, 2 children)

The added value of “home alone” caring is therefore more explicit than in the previous profiles: it is a step towards full individual autonomy as a confident caregiver but it also enhances the father’s specific profile as a highly involved parent and a competent promoter

of work-family balance. Moreover, all these men see the strengthening of family bonds as a crucial factor. Strong father-child bonds are only possible, they say, when fathers spend a long time alone with the baby; in addition, this profile highlights the importance of creating empathy with the mother's feeling of extreme tiredness when it is she alone who is caring. As a result, leave in all its forms is seen as positive, but the time the father spends alone is also seen as being of special importance.

Fathers in the last *innovation* and *deconstruction* pattern closely follow the experiences described in the previous profile, but they are more reflexive with regard to the impact of leave on gender roles. The father values becoming a fully independent caregiver and houseperson but he also regards the period of leave on his own as a fertile ground for building gender equality. In fact, part of the challenge was to demonstrate to themselves and others that they were capable of expertly combining all these aspects of a "homeparent" rather than just caring for a baby during the day. From this perspective the father sees himself as an "egalitarian" partner who is "at the heart of the family" as his wife is. Moving beyond the activities involved in the efficient promotion of work-family balance, the three men in this profile also seek to "test themselves out" by embarking on tasks regarded as more difficult, such as having meals ready on schedule, having people in to eat, or planning a heavier task load. They also become more reflexive with regard to gender relations, questioning those differences between men and women which are conventionally held to be natural. This profile not only strengthens autonomy and bonds but also enables the period of leave to be viewed as a time when parents are able to deal with "in-built" cultural norms. An additional impact underlined by these fathers is the emergence of feelings of competition between fathering and mothering, with the need for some negotiation of when and how each parent spends time with the child and how caregiving is carried out.

I really had to "roll up my sleeves". I looked after the baby, but I also did all the housework and made a point of having supper ready on time. So the main advantage of this is that it puts men and women on a par, it's equates men's role to the role that was always the woman's. So it's a way of understanding the traditional tasks and worries that belonged to women, it's a new experience from this point of view, it really is! (Samuel, 29, nurse, 1 child)

I became more involved in all the daily decisions, for example, giving my opinion on what we should do with the baby. This produced another point of conflict between Sally and me, or rather, something which we have to keep discussing and work out. (Fred, 35, designer, 1 child)

Several factors seem to encourage this profile in our study: first, these are men who were previously highly involved fathers within an egalitarian conjugal division of work, a context which encourages them to deconstruct and neutralize gender in family roles (e.g. all things may be done by him or her). Secondly, these are highly educated men who emphasize the value of work-family balance rather than just their work life and personal careers. Thirdly, these are pro-active fathers who make an extra effort while on leave, in order to make sure they know how to do everything and more; this ties in with an ideal norm of individualized parenthood, one which is not mediated by the mother and where it is important not only to take everything on, but also to do everything in one's own way. In this profile therefore, in contrast to the previous profiles, we cannot say that it is "home alone" leave that actually generates the discourse of gender deconstruction. The findings demon-

strate that the period of leave allows these men to put their changing conceptions to the test, particularly as far as the interchangeability of fathers and mothers is concerned.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In concluding, it is important to note that our discussion of the lived experiences of fathers on “home alone” leave is methodologically limited, in that it draws on a sample of fourteen fathers living in one country. It is therefore an exploratory study seeking to capture emerging processes and change rather than identify all the possible diversity of fathers’ views. In this concluding section we return to the research issues at the centre of this article and draw together the implications of our arguments.

Our key aim was to explore the situation of fathers on leave alone and to capture the social processes that structure their experiences. A second issue was to understand to what extent they confirm or challenge a dominant model of fatherhood and “masculine care” identified in previous studies. Drawing on the results of our research, we argue that findings reflect a complex process of change for fathers and couples which moves beyond the model of masculine care. To understand this process, however, the qualitative research shows that it is necessary to take into account different processes in the leave experience: fathers not only “negotiate” leave and “do” care but also “learn,” “bond,” “undo” gender and experience new “emotions”; all contribute to a diversity of lived experiences.

Overall, as shown by previous studies, the leave is highly valued because it contributes to work-family balance and well-being, personal fulfilment and the strengthening of father-child bonds. However, it may also be seen to enable fathers to learn new instrumental and expressive parental skills, to foster male autonomy in unpaid work, and to undo preconceived gender norms and practices. These three last foci of lived experiences seem to be strongly or even uniquely related to taking “home alone” leave. It is in the context of a break with female mediation that the father’s self-definition as a capable, independent or primary caregiver emerges with some strength and puts previous gender roles in question, in particular the idea that the mother is the natural caregiver. On the other hand, it is also through being alone with a baby that fathers describe a process of integration of traditionally feminine psychological traits, such as emotional literacy; in this respect, our results may seem similar to those on studies of “stay-at-home” fathers, but they do not reveal the feeling of social isolation found in men in this situation (Doucet, 2005).

Two factors may contribute to this difference. First, in Portugal this is a state supported solution, not a private family-based one. Fathers are not opting out of the labour market, they are “on leave” from work and feelings of isolation are usually greater when social legitimacy and support of stay-at-home fathering is low. Secondly, the short duration of leave tends to preserve fathers’ networks of work and personal relationships.

This does not mean that the lived experiences of fathers are always similar or equally transgressive from a gender perspective. We have also noticed significant differences, making for considerable plurality in the personal and social consequences of fathers’ leave. In a profile associated with critical discourses and practices, some “innovative-deconstructive” fathers openly question existing conceptions of gender roles. At the opposite end of gender undoing, we find profiles in which change is seen as transitional (while father is on leave) and does not lead necessarily to an open questioning of the mother’s primary role in care and early parenthood; however, even these fathers see themselves as acquiring new skills and autonomy, with some going through the experience of a fundamental breakthrough in conjugal gender roles which seemed to be unequivocally cemented in inequality.

More importantly perhaps, our findings point to social experiences not of “slow time” and “masculine care” but rather of “fast time” and “parental” care, meaning that the discovery of new and individualized skills promotes fathers’ self-confidence in the equal and interchangeable competences of fathers and mothers when caring for a baby. The main issue here is that this type of leave seems to challenge, in varying degrees, the notion of parental care mediation as a female prerogative.

It is important to understand the possible influence of national cultural and policy context on these findings, and of two factors in particular. First, in contrast with previous studies, the leave bonus in Portugal means that all fathers were caring for a baby rather than a toddler aged one or over. The care of a baby, usually taken on by mothers and seen as more difficult, is likely to reinforce feelings of increased responsibility and autonomy.

Secondly, the influence of more traditional gender discourses and practices was not as overriding as might be expected. Given Portugal’s track of strong family support and persistent gender equalities in unpaid work, we expected to find a predominant pattern of fathers who delegated some of the care to other women while on leave, thereby making for a specific type of “masculine care.” However, our qualitative results clearly point in a different direction: experiences are diverse, and the predominant patterns reveal fathers who take on new responsibilities rather than delegate care and housework. From a policy perspective, this means that even in a more laggard changing gender regime such as the Portuguese, recent developments in normative and policy context are promoting the acceptance of more involved fathering and enabling a substantial group of fathers to take up leave alone in diverse and innovative ways.

Finally, to understand fully the influence of national context as well as the social consequences of policies encouraging “home alone” leave, it would be important to carry out this type of study in welfare states with different levels of attention to fatherhood and gender equality in early parenthood. Our findings underline the importance of entitlement to “home alone” leave, not only for father-child and conjugal bonds, but also for male autonomy, the learning of parental skills and the undoing of gender roles in family life. Different policy architecture and other pathways in gender and care regimes may reveal diverse or additional effects of father-sensitive policy contexts.

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